

# Bearing *the* Burden

*Kyrgyz Republic air base supports Global War on Terrorism*

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr. ♣ photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

**B**orn out of the war on terrorism, Manas Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic, uses the resolve from Sept. 11, 2001, as a beacon for freedom.

Like mourning the loss of a loved one, servicemembers at Manas Air Base don't want to forget. Framed photocopied photos of the airliners crashing into the World Trade Center are tacked to office walls around the base with the words, "That's why."

**Manas Air Base's Chaplain Lt. Col. Stan Giles addresses a group of Airmen, Soldiers and Marines from the back of a C-130H Hercules prior to their departure into Afghanistan. Night or day, Chaplain Giles shakes the hands of and speaks to every servicemember leaving for a war zone.**



While New Yorkers removed the rubble that was once the World Trade Center, the U.S. military looked to take the fight to the enemy as part of the global war on terrorism. The Kyrgyz Republic became a focal point.

On Dec. 16, 2001, members of the 86th Contingency Response Group at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, braved the town's bitterly cold winter to build a base from scratch. Three months later, they had set up 200 tents, unloaded more than 12 million pounds of cargo and hauled in more than 1,000 coalition members.

Soon, Americans and coalition troops were calling Manas their deployed home away from home.

The Kyrgyz Republic is about the size of Nebraska. It's bordered by China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (See "K-2 Connection," November 2004). The base is nestled among crops of grain, with pastures teaming with cows, chickens, goats and geese. Located at the base of the snowcapped Ala-Too Mountains, the rich farm valley provides plenty of food for sheep, mountain goats and yaks.

The Kyrgyz Republic receives an estimated \$156,000 a day by allowing the Air Force to share its commercial runway, feeding and supplying Airmen, assessing landing and parking fees, and leasing land. The country earns about \$52 million a year from the Air Force, according to local Air Force officials. The base also employs about 400 local nationals.

### Beefing up the base

Although it's still considered a bare base, plans include constructing semi-permanent facilities,

beefing up its infrastructure, and basically improving Manas' quality of life for its 1,100 deployed residents. Base officials authorized \$60 million to overhaul the base. Moving out of tents will help deployed troops cope with extreme weather conditions.

"We have weather extremes — very hot and dusty summers and cold winters," said Col. Brad Pray, 376th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, deployed from Ramstein Air Base, Germany. "This bare base will be facing its fourth winter, and we want to reduce the number of tents on site and make them hard billets. We also get dust storms that roll in and hamper our flying."

### Supporting a war

Although storms may sometimes hamper flying operations, nearly nothing else can stop the flow of people and cargo to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom. The team that meets that daily mission is a mix of active-duty, Guard, Reserve, civilian employees, local hires and contractors.

"We see the total force every day at Manas," Colonel Pray said. "That's what it's going to take to win the war on terrorism. We have to work together."

Among those on his team, Colonel Pray is most impressed with the younger Airmen. Their careers, too, were born from terrorism.

"These young folks have been in maybe three or four years, and this is the [operations tempo] they've maintained their entire careers. They excel

at it," Colonel Pray said. "We have a talented group of people who have matured into this mission."

### It takes a village

This dedication and togetherness can be seen in common, everyday challenges. When the wing's services commander, Lt. Col. Eddie Adelman, started dismantling medical tents, 15 others pitched in to help.

"We didn't have to ask anyone because people here just like to help," said Colonel Adelman, who deployed from Aviano Air Base, Italy. "You start something here, and people will help you finish it."

Such was the case with Master Sgt. Jeff Duracka, a civil engineer readiness supervisor deployed from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. After the base received an overage of drinking water, base officials decided to place the boxes in strategic locations around the base so water would be easily accessible. After a major rain storm, the cardboard boxes dropped around the stack of water bottles like adult-sized wet socks on a child. Sergeant Duracka took it on himself to remove all the wet cardboard and place the bottles in wooden bins. He wasn't told to do it. He just did it.

### Hometown hospitality

This need to volunteer extends beyond the gates of Manas. Although Bishkek is not their hometown, Manas Airmen treat it as such. At the Hope for Life Children's Hospital, kids suffering different stages of cancer wear hats, bandanas and scarves to hide their

baldness. Occasionally, members from the Manas Air Base Outreach Society collect enough school supplies to warrant a visit.

"It's sad to see bald kids, but it was nice seeing their smiles," said Staff Sgt. Diana Sperle, a protocol specialist who deployed from Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M. "It's emotionally draining to visit these kids, but it's worth it."

For a short time, the

### Airmen deployed to Manas have a breathtaking view

of the nearby Ala-Too Mountains from the tent city. The base became a hub for transporting people and cargo supporting Operation Enduring Freedom following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.



### Security forces members

Staff Sgt. Noland Noble and Senior Airman Josh Lopez lead a two-vehicle security perimeter patrol through a community located outside Manas Air Base, Kyrgyz Republic. The Air Force is the sole provider of security for the joint services base.





To Donate

The Manas Air Base Outreach Society accepts donations of cash, shoes, clothing, toys, candy, bedding, toiletries and diapers. To donate, send the donations to: 376 AEW/EHC APO, AE 09353

children forget their sicknesses when they color in books, blow soap bubbles and play with balloons. The society also helps pay for children's heart surgeries.

Staff Sgt. April Anderson became a local celebrity



when she donated half her pay, \$560, to help pay for a child's heart surgery. "April really kick-started the project," Sergeant Sperle said about the \$4,000 the group raised for the children's heart program.

"April said that paying \$560 wasn't much money to save the life of a child," she said. "If not for her, we wouldn't have raised that much money."

Have a heart

The people of Manas have proven time and again that they have heart — on the job and off.

"It's difficult to deploy overseas and leave your family and friends behind for the cause of freedom," Colonel Pray said. "Despite that, these folks have really stepped up the pace."

The Air Force drew Airmen from around the world to points on the planet to combat terrorism, and one of those locations was Manas. Although 9-11 happened a little more than three years ago, it's still fresh on the minds of the young Airmen deployed far away from home. ☺



Staff Sgt. April Anderson hands out school supplies to 11-year-old Emilbek Taalaybek, who is undergoing chemotherapy treatments for Leukemia. The sergeant was credited with saving the life of a child when she donated more than \$500 to help fund medical expenses for children in the local community.

## Combating the clock at Manas

Senior Airman Derek Smith and Airman 1st Class Alex O'Donnell are perched high atop a C-130 Hercules trying to solve a mechanical problem. The No. 3 engine had a prop replaced a week prior, and flight deck indicator lights now point out a malfunction.

It's a mild 78 degrees at 8:50 a.m. when their supervisor stops by and turns up the heat.

"A flight crew will be by at 10 to preflight the aircraft," Tech. Sgt. Eric Bradley yells up at them from his truck. "Think you can have it done by then?" The fact that it's a

Saturday has no bearing on these maintainers.

"Yeah, no problem," they say.

Sergeant Bradley knew they were going to say that. He said his Airmen aren't afraid to tackle a dilemma — even if it happens half a world away from their home base at Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark.

"We've got our A-team out here," Sergeant Bradley says. "I'd take these guys anywhere, anyplace, anytime."

After their supervisor drives away, a troublesome screw gives Airman O'Donnell difficulty. Airman Smith quits working on the prop to give his buddy a hand. As Airman O'Donnell uses his weight to push a metal engine panel down with his foot, Airman Smith tightens the loose screw.

By the time they fit the panel into place, it's 9:10 a.m. The clock is ticking.

"This is what we do every day," says Airman Smith as he redirects his attention to the engine prop. He enjoys what he does, despite the frequent deployments, which sometimes interfere with personal relationships.

"When you're married, you can return after a four-month deployment and still have the same person waiting for you," said Airman Smith, who is single.

"When you're single and you deploy for a long time, all bets are off. Sometimes you return home more single than when you left."

During the year-and-a-half Airman O'Donnell's been in the Air Force, he hasn't had time to spark a romance.

"No girlfriend. No time," he says, putting the finishing touches on the C-130 prop. But he doesn't seem to mind. A month after the terrorist attack on America, Airman O'Donnell visited

the pile of rubble that was once the World Trade Center.

"I returned to my hotel that night, turned on the TV and listened to [then] New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani," Airman O'Donnell said. "That's when I pretty much decided to join the Air Force to defend my nation."

Airman O'Donnell isn't only learning a new trade; he has to get used to the unit's gypsy lifestyle. Although his supervisor has been in the business for 14 years, even Sergeant Bradley has difficulty coping with the grueling deployment pace.

"From September 2003 to now, I've been deployed 269 days out of the year," Sergeant Bradley said. "Being away from my family is the hardest part of this job. You think you'd eventually get used to it, but you don't. You just find new ways to cope with it."

By now, it's 9:20. He doesn't want to do it, but Sergeant Bradley takes his crew away from its job to help another C-130 crew park and shut down. The aircraft is expected to land in a few minutes with some maintenance problems of its own.

"These guys not only deploy a lot, but they put in some long hours," Sergeant Bradley says. "After 12 hours, most people get tired, but not O'Donnell. When he hears of an engine problem, he's chomping at the bit to get to it."

When the troubled C-130 lands a few minutes later, O'Donnell jumps out of the van as if it were on fire. By the time the other C-130 lands and Airmen O'Donnell and Smith connect it to auxiliary power, it's 9:35 before they get back to finish their original job.

Tick tock, goes the clock.

They climb into the cockpit, put on

headphones and crank up the No. 3 engine to see if they fixed the problem. They're looking for the indicator light to blink on, then off.

Sergeant Bradley hears over the radio that the flight crew is on its way. With the engine running, he can't be heard so he walks close to the aircraft where the Airmen in the cockpit can see him. He gives a "thumbs up" sign and then a "thumbs down" sign, and then shrugs his shoulders, using signals to ask the two if the system checks out.

They return with thumbs-up, and finish with five minutes to spare.

Now, they've got to start on that other C-130, the one they recovered a half hour ago.

Another deadline is set, and the clock starts — again.

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